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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM TH
SUBJECT: TRAVELS ALONG THE MEKHONG: THAKSIN'S AURA
DIMINISHED BUT LEGACY REMAINS

Classified By: Political Counselor George P. Kent, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶11. (C) Contacts along the border with Laos in northeastern Thailand told us prior to the mid-April Songkran riots that rural voters had begun to shift their focus beyond the personal draw of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to issues that affected their local communities. Despite the apparent decline in Thaksin's stature, the party identified with his views was likely to continue to outpace other parties because northerners trusted it to address their concerns. Our discussions also pointed to Buddhist monks in the region becoming increasingly politically active, most likely reflecting growing frustration in the Northeast over the direction of national politics. End Summary and Comment.

VOTERS FOCUSING ON POLICIES RATHER THAN THAKSIN

¶12. (C) PolOff, EXBS Advisor, and Pol LES recently traveled to the northeastern (Isaan) provinces of Nong Khai and Ubon Ratchathani to discuss with a wide range of contacts political sentiment. In Nong Khai, we sat down with an academic, a politically active monk, and an election commissioner. They told us that for those living in Nong Khai, policies had become more important than the personalities of politicians, in particular the draw of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. (Note: These meetings were held prior to the mid-April protests in Bangkok and Pattaya by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship - UDD, so-called redshirts who draw much of their support from Isaan. End Note.)

¶13. (SBU) Sanyu Kenaphoom, a politically active monk at a local temple and lecturer at Suan Dusit Rajabhat University in Nong Khai, said populist policies were important for local people. Voters were increasingly evaluating policies in regard to the benefits that would accrue to their communities. As such, policies had transcended personal connections which had dominated the political process in the past. Sanyu told us that Thaksin-era policies that had benefited people outside Bangkok had brought about change in voting behavior. Rural people had begun to understand the effect of choices and had gained confidence in making choices independent of the influence of local politicians.

¶14. (SBU) Sanyu said that the political divide extended beyond Bangkok; in the Northeast the city-rural split in support for the Democrat Party remained important. For example, the mayor of Nong Khai city was from the Democrat Party. Despite some areas of support for the Democrats, most local people assessed politicians who had supported Thaksin as more likely

to address their concerns. Voters were less concerned about vote buying or corruption because making a living was more important to rural people than pursuit of better democracy. Venus Iam-sa-at, a long-time Thai Rath newspaper reporter and businesswoman in Ubol Ratchatani, confirmed Sanyu's view that voters cared little about corruption and highlighted numerous cases of local politicians enriching themselves or relatives with government money.

¶15. (SBU) Venus told us that people in Ubol had begun to evaluate policies as more important than the personal drawing power of Thaksin. Despite this, there remained a split among the "Reds" in the province, as some politicians considered former Prime Minister to be a useful vehicle for support. Despite the split, Venus told us that the Phumjai Thai Party and its informal leader, Newin Chidchob, had been unable to capitalize by drawing support from Ubol Ratchatani. Venus predicted that Phumjai Thai would continue to be a mid-size party that would be a swing factor in determining the next Prime Minister.

¶16. (C) Niran Phitakwatchara, a community activist who was recently elected by the Thai Senate to the National Human Rights Commission, echoed Venus' assessment that those who had supported Thaksin were now split. Niran described recent events as a return to the ideological politics of the 1970s when the Thai government fought to suppress communism.

MONKS MORE ACTIVE IN POLITICS

¶17. (C) When we asked about Buddhist monks and institutions

becoming more active and vocal in politics, Sanyu claimed that Northeast monks tended to be more in touch with the local people than those elsewhere in the country. As such, they were more vocal about the political conflict that has plagued Thailand than monks in Bangkok, whom Sanyu assessed to be more compliant to central authorities. One reason for increased activism was a belief that an "invisible hand" had become more active than in the past, Sanyu said. (Note: We understood this reference to be the perceived influence of the Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, although it might have been to the royal family itself. End note.) Therefore, monks in Isaan, who believed it was important to protect the community, had sought to counteract what they saw as an inappropriate role for an institution outside that was not formally part of the political process.

¶18. (C) Arkkaradech Senanikorn, a member of the Faculty of Public Administration at Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, and Kajnarong Suriyawon, a Nong Khai Election Commissioner, agreed that monks in the Northeast were becoming more politically active and explained this by pointing to the traditionally close relationship that monks have had with local people. Recent political activism by monks reflected discontent in among local people in northeastern Thailand with the state of politics and governance.

RURAL PEOPLE GAINING UNDERSTANDING OF LOCAL ISSUES

¶19. (SBU) Nong Khai Mayor Songpol Kowitsirikun, a member of the Democrat Party, told us that in order for his party to do better in Isaan it needed to place more emphasis on creating and following through on policies that directly benefit the people. Of particular importance to the people of Nong Khai was education policy, but while the electorate wanted quick results, education policy changes were long term processes.

¶10. (SBU) Faculty members at Ubol Ratchatani Rajabhat University told us students at the university were not as interested in developments in Bangkok as they were in issues that affected their local communities, such as infrastructure, development, and education. The Dean of the Faculty of Political Science said the university had, in response to interest in local government, developed one of the few programs in Thailand that was dedicated to training

students to become officials in local administration. The first class would graduate from the program this year, and faculty members hoped that improving local governance would reduce dependency on the central government in Bangkok.

¶11. (SBU) Highlighting the shift to local issues, community activist Niran told us that provincial level NGOs hoped for support from the U.S. as they tried to develop capabilities. Niran said that the populace outside Bangkok was becoming increasing aware of politics and human rights, as such it was important for the U.S. to engage local NGOs. (Note: Our FY2009 Democracy and Governance funding focuses heavily on supporting community organizations. End Note.)

EXCITED BY U.S. POLITICAL PROCESS

¶12. (U) Throughout the trip, we found extensive interest in the recent U.S. presidential election. Almost universally, contacts expressed enthusiasm for the presidency of Barack Obama and lauded the U.S. political process as one that they wished Thailand could emulate. For example, one contact brought "The Audacity of Hope" with him to the meeting and was eager to discuss the book.

¶13. (SBU) Suan Dusit Rajabhat University lecturer Arkkaradech drew a contrast to the U.S., describing the Thai political system as flawed because parties that lost elections were not willing to accept defeat. Kajnarong Suriyawong, a Nong Khai Election Commissioner, said this flaw was based on the Thai concept of a political party as a gang that relied on the patronage system to thrive. Winners of elections in Thailand had been able to effectively direct public benefits to their supporters. As such, supporters of the losing parties were often driven to more forceful expressions of discontent in order to gain the attention of the government.

JOHN